

ROUND UP



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FRESH GREENS IN THE DEAD OF WINTER



Mountain Roots sets up hydroponic growing operation

Jacob Spetzler

Photo and Sports Editor

On a Tuesday afternoon in November, two Mountain Roots employees, Bailey Burgess and Brandon Hunter, did something uncommon for the coming cold and dark Gunnison winter — they harvested fresh lettuce. The lettuce, grown in the organization's new hydroponics operation, will be includ-

ed in Backyard Harvest boxes, the nonprofit's food security program.

The hydroponics setup is built into four Conex shipping containers recently acquired from Crested Butte's now defunct Tassinong Farms. Burgess, the hydroponic farm manager, explained that each container is a closed system, operating on its own. Inside, rows of produce hang from 256 white towers stacked side by side. Every tower holds anywhere from seven to 20 plants, totalling thousands of individual heads of lettuce.

A large tank at the back contains water which has been filtered through reverse osmosis. The plants pull nutrients from the water which is distributed on a timer. Any runoff is captured and

Mtn Roots B2



Brandon Hunter and Bailey Burgess work together to harvest lettuce.

Jacob Spetzler

The color of a head of hydroponically grown lettuce is distorted by the pink light from the UV hanging light strips.

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Two rows of lettuce are divided by hanging UV light strips.

Mtn Roots

from B1

reused, drastically lowering the amount of water the system requires — currently only 10 gallons a day, according to Burgess. The towers face each other, split down the middle by hanging UV light strips which cast a pinkish, purple hue over the scene.

The Mountain Roots hydroponic setup isn't the first of its kind in the valley, but Burgess said the nonprofit is aiming to make an already very green process even more sustainable. Hydroponics itself isn't so complex, she said, but there's a history of trade secrets stemming from the practice's early history in the originally illegal cannabis industry.

"It's kind of a scary science, but it's pretty simple," she said. "And then the thing we're complicating is just getting [the system] to be as sustainable as we can. That's been really fun for me, because I'm a nerd, in that sense. We're like, how little can we water this for it to still be growing beautifully? And how

little nutrients ... how many inputs can we not give it?"

Burgess, who holds a degree in sustainable community development and appropriate technology, was hired by Mountain Roots specifically to build out the hydroponics system. A grant from the Community Foundation meant for veteran entrepreneurial programs partially funds the operation. The plan is for Hunter, a veteran, to take over the hands-on work once he and Burgess have worked out the kinks in the science of the system.

In the future, as she and her team perfect the method, Burgess said the hope is to grow even more water-intensive produce, such as tomatoes or strawberries.

"A couple of years down the line we really want to explore pollinating and those things," she said. "That that will definitely be a year, two or three away, but that's something to look forward to."

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Brandon Hunter carries a tower.

Jacob Spetzler